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THE PHYSICAL MICHELANGELO

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You will say that I am old and mad, but I answer that there is no better way of keeping sane and free from anxiety than by being mad.

HAD Michelangelo been less poetic and more explicit in his language, he might have said there is nothing so conducive to mental and physical wholeness as saturation of body and mind with work. The great artist was so prone to over-anxiety and met (whether needlessly or not) with so many rebuffs and disappointments, that only constant absorption in manual labor prevented spirit from fretting itself free from flesh. He toiled "furiously" in all his mighty undertakings and body and mind remained one and in superior harmony—in abundant health—for nearly four score and ten years.

This Titan got his start in life in the rugged country three miles outside Florence: a place of quarries, where stone cutters and sculptors lived and worked. His mother's health was failing and it was to the wife of one of these artisans that her baby was given to nurse. Half in jest, half in earnest, Michelangelo said one day to Vasari:

If I have anything good in me, that comes from my birth in the pure air of my country of Arezzo, and perhaps also from the fact that with the milk of my nurse, I sucked in the chisels and hammers wherewith I make my figures.

He began his serious study of art (and with it his course in "physical training") at fourteen, when he became apprenticed to a painter. He was not vigorous as a child, but his bodily powers unfolded and were intensified through their active expression of his imagination.

His life was devoted with passion to art. He had from the start no time for frivolity. Art became his religion—and required of him the sacrifice of all that might keep him below his highest level of power for work. His father early warned him to have a care for his health, "for," said he, "in your profession, if once you were to fall ill you would be a ruined man." To one so intent on perfection and so keenly alive to imperfection such advice must have been nearly superfluous, for the artist could not but observe the effect upon his work of any depression of his bodily well-being. He was, besides, too thrifty in all respects to think of lapsing into bodily neglect or abuse. He was severely temperate, but not ascetic, save in those times when devotion to work caused him to sleep with his clothes on, that he might not lose time in seizing the chisel when he awoke. He ate to live and to labor, and was pleased with a present of "fifteen marzolino cheeses and fourteen pounds of sausage—the latter very welcome, as was also the cheese." Over a gift of choice wines he is not so enthusiastic and the bottles found their way mostly to the tables of his friends and patrons. When intent on some work he usually "confined his diet to a piece of bread

which he ate in the middle of his labors." Few hours (we have no accurate statement in the matter) were devoted to sleep. He ate comparatively little because he worked better: he slept less than many men because he worked better in consequence. Partly for protection against cold, partly perhaps for economy of time, he sometimes left his high dog-skin boots on for so long that when he removed them the scarf skin came away like the skin of a moulting serpent.

He dressed for comfort and not to mortify the flesh. Upon the receipt of a present of some shirts from his nephew he writes:

I am very much surprised ye should have sent them to me, for they are so coarse that there is not a farm laborer here who would not be ashamed to wear them.

He is much pleased with a finer lot selected later by his nephew's new wife. Perhaps he did not come up to modern notions of cleanliness (he was early advised by his father never to bathe but to have his body rubbed instead) but he was clean inside, which can not be said of all who make much of a well-washed skin.

His intensity of purpose and fiery energy expressed themselves in his features and form. "His face was round, his brow square, ample," and deeply furrowed: "the temples projected much beyond the ears"; his eyes were "small rather than large," of a dark (some said horn) color and peered, piercingly, from under heavy brows. The flattened nose was the result of a blow from a rival apprentice. He evidently looked the part, though for such mental powers one of his colossal statues would seem a more fitting mold.

Michelangelo experienced some illnesses, all but two of them of minor moment. In 1531 he "became alarmingly ill, and the Pope ordered him to quit most of his work and to take better care of his health." That the illness was a storm merely of the surface is evidenced sufficiently in that his fresco of the "Last Judgment," probably the most famous single picture in the world, was begun years later and completed in his sixty-sixth year. In the work of this epoch there is more than ever the evidence of a pouring forth of energy amounting almost to what the critics call violence—to terribleness of action. It was not until the age of seventy that an illness which seemed to mark any weakening of his bodily powers came upon him. At seventy-five, symptoms of calculus (a disease common in that day at fifty) appeared, but, though naturally pessimistic, he writes, "In all other respects I am pretty much as I was at thirty years." He improved under careful medical treatment, but the illness and his age were sufficient to cause him to "think of putting his spiritual and temporal affairs in better order than he had hitherto done."

He wielded the brush and the chisel with consummate skill in his seventy-fifth year. With the later loss of cunning his energy found vent more in the planning and supervising of architectural works, cul-

minating in the building of St. Peter's, but even in these later years he took up the chisel as an outlet for superfluous energy and to induce sleep. Though the product of his hand was not good, his health was the better for this mutual exercise of mind and body. In his eighty-sixth year he is said to have sat drawing for three consecutive hours until pains and cramps in his limbs warned him that he had not the endurance of youth. For exercise, when manual labor proved a disappointment, he often took horseback rides. There was no invalidism about this great spirit, and it was not until the day before his death that he would consent to go to bed.

In a poem of his last years he burlesques his infirmities in his usual vigorous manner.

I live alone and wretched, confined like the pith within the bark of the tree. . . . My voice is like a wasp imprisoned within a sack of skin and bone. . . . My teeth rattle like the keys of an old musical instrument. . . . My face is a scarecrow. . . . There is a ceaseless buzzing in my ears—in one a spider spins his web, in the other a cricket chirps all night. . . . My catarrh, which causes a rattle in my throat, will not allow me to sleep.—Fatigue has quite broken me, and the hostlery which awaits me is Death.

Few men at his age have had less reason to find in themselves other than the changes to be expected with the passing of years and in prose he acknowledged that he had no more affections of the flesh than were to be expected at his age. Codiva pictures him in his last years as "of good complexion; more muscular and bony than fat or fleshy in his person: healthy above all things, as well by reason of his natural constitution as of the exercise he takes, and habitual continence in food and sexual indulgence." His temperance and manual industry and his "extraordinary blamelessness in life and in every action" had been his source of preservation. He was miserly, suspicious, quarrelsome and pessimistic, but the effects of these faults were balanced by his better habits of thought and action. That he, like most great men, felt keenly the value of health, is evidenced not only by his own practise, but by his oft repeated warnings to his nephew when choosing a wife to see that whatever other qualities she might have she be healthy. The blemish of nearsight he considered a no small defect and sufficient to render a young woman unworthy of entry into the proud family of the Buonarroti. To his own father he wrote: "Look to your life and health, for a man does not come back again to patch up things ill done."

One of those who look beneath unusual human phenomena for signs of the pathologic finds Michelangelo "affected by a degree of neuropathy bordering closely upon hysterical disease." What a pity that more of us do not suffer from such degrees of neuropathy—and how much better for most of us if we had such enthusiasm for perfection, and such mania for work, at least of that health-bringing sort in which there is absorbing colabor of brain and hand. True it is that "there is no better way of keeping sane and free from anxiety than by being mad."